

(1) With respect to the staffing needs of the Department police force—

(A) identification of the amount of turnover among Department police officers;

(B) how the compensation for Department police officers affects such turnover;

(C) a comparison of such compensation with the compensation provided to specialty police units, such as police units at medical facilities and other police units in the same locality pay area; and

(D) the plan developed under subsection (d), including—

(i) estimates on the costs to carry out the plan; and

(ii) any recommendations for legislative actions required to carry out the plan.

(2) With respect to body worn cameras, a review of the implementation and use of body worn cameras by Department police officers, including under pilot programs carried out by the Secretary during the five-year period preceding the date of the report.

(f) DEFINITIONS.—In this section:

(1) The term “body worn camera” means a camera worn on an individual police officer’s person that records and stores audio and video.

(2) The term “Department police officer” means an employee of the Department of Veterans Affairs described in section 902(a) of title 38, United States Code.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to the rule, the gentleman from California (Mr. TAKANO) and the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. BOST) each will control 20 minutes.

The Chair recognizes the gentleman from California.

GENERAL LEAVE

Mr. TAKANO. Madam Speaker, I ask unanimous consent that all Members may have 5 legislative days to revise and extend their remarks and to insert extraneous material on H.R. 2429.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Is there objection to the request of the gentleman from California?

There was no objection.

Mr. TAKANO. Madam Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

Madam Speaker, I am pleased to support H.R. 2429, the VA Police Improvement and Accountability Act, introduced by former Committee on Veterans’ Affairs member Representative RICE from New York.

This bipartisan legislation cosponsored by Representative RADEWAGEN would improve the transparency and accountability of the VA police. Specifically, the legislation would require the VA police to publish online information about arrests and use of force, as well as establish a consistent way for the public to obtain more detailed information about those incidents.

Importantly, this bill would also require VA to have its police use body-worn cameras, publish guidance on the use of such cameras, improve tracking and analysis of arrests and other police actions, and develop a staffing plan that adequately supports every VA facility’s needs. Together, these improvements will build accountability and trust between the VA police and anyone who walks through VA facility doors across the country.

H.R. 2429 was reported favorably by the committee, and I ask my col-

leagues to join me in supporting the VA Police Improvement and Accountability Act.

Madam Speaker, I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. BOST. Madam Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

Madam Speaker, I rise today in support of H.R. 2429, the VA Police Improvement and Accountability Act.

This bill represents months of bipartisan work by the committee. I thank my colleagues for their efforts.

This bill would increase transparency and accountability in the VA police force by requiring each officer to wear a body-worn camera. It would also require VA to make police statistics public and available and report on police actions, including arrests and use of force.

Madam Speaker, 2 years ago, the VA began modernizing its police force. This legislation would support the VA’s ongoing efforts.

Veterans deserve safe environments in which to seek the care and benefits they have earned. I believe this legislation and the VA work will help provide those safe environments.

Madam Speaker, I encourage all of my colleagues to support this bill, and I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. TAKANO. Madam Speaker, I yield 2 minutes to the gentleman from New York (Miss RICE), my good friend, a former member of the Veterans’ Affairs Committee, and the lead Democratic cosponsor.

Miss RICE of New York. Madam Speaker, I rise today in support of my bipartisan bill, the VA Police Improvement and Accountability Act, H.R. 2429. This bill takes important steps to strengthen oversight and accountability for VA police and law enforcement operations.

A number of shortcomings with VA’s law enforcement operations were identified in a hearing held by the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs last Congress. Inadequate policing procedures and a lack of true oversight for the Department’s police force were two of the pressing issues raised at the hearing.

Challenges with management and oversight of VA police were also revealed in subsequent reports issued by the VA Office of Inspector General and the Government Accountability Office. These challenges include insufficient officer staffing, inappropriate conduct, and other concerning issues at VA facilities across the country.

On Long Island, I have worked with one of my constituents who was horribly mistreated by the Northport VA police. Our veterans deserve much better from an agency that is always supposed to be on their side.

My bill aims to address these pressing issues with the VA police by requiring the VA police to implement the use of body cameras, improve data collection and reporting on police incidents at VA facilities, and enact other important measures to strengthen oversight

and transparency for VA’s police program.

Madam Speaker, I thank my Republican co-lead, Representative RADEWAGEN, for joining me on this bill. I also thank Chairman TAKANO and Ranking Member BOST for helping to bring H.R. 2429 to the floor today.

Madam Speaker, I urge my colleagues to support this bipartisan legislation to help us better serve and protect our Nation’s veterans.

Mr. BOST. Madam Speaker, I have no further speakers, and I yield back the balance of my time.

Mr. TAKANO. Madam Speaker, I urge all my colleagues to support the bill of the gentlewoman from New York (Miss RICE).

Madam Speaker, I yield back the balance of my time.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The question is on the motion offered by the gentleman from California (Mr. TAKANO) that the House suspend the rules and pass the bill, H.R. 2429.

The question was taken; and (two-thirds being in the affirmative) the rules were suspended and the bill was passed.

A motion to reconsider was laid on the table.

VA FOIA REFORM ACT OF 2021

Mr. TAKANO. Madam Speaker, I move to suspend the rules and pass the bill (H.R. 2726) to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to establish a plan to reduce the backlog of requests for information made to the Department of Veterans Affairs pursuant to section 552 of title 5, United States Code, and for other purposes.

The Clerk read the title of the bill.

The text of the bill is as follows:

H.R. 2726

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.

This Act may be cited as the “VA FOIA Reform Act of 2021”.

SEC. 2. PLAN FOR REDUCTION OF BACKLOG OF FOIA REQUESTS.

(a) PLAN.—The Secretary of Veterans Affairs shall establish and carry out a plan for the Secretary to meet, by not later than five years after the date of the enactment of this Act, the requirements of section 552 of title 5, United States Code, with respect to providing documents and information under such section within the timeframes required by such section. The plan shall include the following:

(1) Improving and acquiring technology, including with respect to searching email and other electronic information, and the timelines for such improvement, to ensure that the information technology of the Department of Veterans Affairs is capable of carrying out the plan.

(2) Identification of efficient procedures, policies, and systems of the Department that could be developed to allow employees of the Department responsible for replying to requests under such section 552 to search and review documents rather than other employees of the Department.

(3) A schedule for carrying out the plan, including key milestones and metrics.

(b) COMPLIANCE ASSESSMENT.—The Secretary shall request the Director of the Office of Government Information Services of the National Archives and Records Administration to conduct an assessment of the compliance by the Department of Veterans Affairs with section 552 of title 5, United States Code.

(c) REPORTS.—

(1) INITIAL REPORT.—Not later than 180 days after the date of the enactment of this Act, the Secretary shall submit to the Committees on Veterans' Affairs of the House of Representatives and the Senate a report on implementing subsections (a) and (b). The report shall include the following:

(A) The plan established under subsection (a).

(B) An analysis of the root causes of the backlog of FOIA requests.

(C) Recommendations with respect to any additional resources or legislative action the Secretary determines necessary for such implementation.

(2) ANNUAL REPORTS.—During the five-year period following the date of the enactment of this Act, the Secretary shall submit to the Committees on Veterans' Affairs of the House of Representatives and the Senate annual reports on—

(A) carrying out the plan under subsection (a), including any updates or changes made to the plan; and

(B) the compliance by the Department as described in subsection (b).

(3) PUBLICATION.—The Secretary shall make publicly available on the internet website of the Department the reports under paragraphs (1) and (2) by not later than 30 days after the date on which the Secretary submits the reports to the Committees on Veterans' Affairs of the House of Representatives and the Senate.

(d) BACKLOG OF FOIA REQUESTS DEFINED.—In this section, the term “backlog of FOIA requests” means the number of requests, as reported by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to the Attorney General in the Annual FOIA Report, made by individuals to the Secretary pursuant to section 552 of title 5, United States Code, for documents or information that the Secretary has not fulfilled or provided a response to the individual.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to the rule, the gentleman from California (Mr. TAKANO) and the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. BOST) each will control 20 minutes.

The Chair recognizes the gentleman from California.

GENERAL LEAVE

Mr. TAKANO. Madam Speaker, I ask unanimous consent that all Members may have 5 legislative days in which to revise and extend their remarks and to insert extraneous material on H.R. 2726.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Is there objection to the request of the gentleman from California?

There was no objection.

Mr. TAKANO. Madam Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

Madam Speaker, I am pleased to support H.R. 2726, the VA FOIA Reform Act of 2021, introduced by Representative GALLEG0, a member of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs.

This bipartisan legislation is cosponsored by Representative MURPHY from North Carolina and would modernize the Department of Veterans Affairs'

Freedom of Information Act, or FOIA, process to help VA meet statutory requirements and improve efficiency.

The FOIA process is essential for ensuring a transparent and accountable VA by allowing the public insight into the workings of a Department that serves millions of veterans each year. However, an enduring backlog of open requests and out-of-date technology have made it difficult for the Department to provide timely access to requested information.

Madam Speaker, this bill would require VA to establish a plan in order to meet all statutory FOIA requirements, identify its technology needs, and carry out this plan within 5 years.

Veterans and their families, employees, and the public who have made FOIA requests at VA have been kept waiting for too long. I hope this bill puts VA on a path to providing FOIA information in a timely manner.

Madam Speaker, H.R. 2726 was reported favorably by the committee, and I ask my colleagues to support the bill.

Madam Speaker, I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. BOST. Madam Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

Madam Speaker, I rise today in support of H.R. 2726, the VA FOIA Reform Act of 2021.

Madam Speaker, over the last few years, VA has worked hard to reduce the Freedom of Information Act, or FOIA, requests backlog. These efforts have achieved some success, but the VA still has a long way to go.

At the end of fiscal year 2020, VA reported 4,206 pending requests. This bill would require VA to carry out a plan to reduce the backlog and comply with existing FOIA requirements.

It would also require VA to report to Congress on a plan and the Department's work. This will help Congress oversee VA's efforts to reduce the FOIA backlog and provide additional resources that may be necessary.

Madam Speaker, I appreciate the bipartisan work on this legislation, and I encourage my colleagues to support it. I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. TAKANO. Madam Speaker, I yield 2 minutes to the gentleman from Arizona (Mr. GALLEG0), my good friend, author of H.R. 2726, and a member of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs.

Mr. GALLEG0. Madam Speaker, I rise today in support of my bill, H.R. 2726, the VA FOIA Reform Act.

Madam Speaker, I thank Chair TAKANO and Ranking Member BOST for bringing this bill to the floor and Representative MURPHY for co-leading this important legislation with me.

The bill is a simple, bipartisan measure to improve efficiency and transparency at the VA.

As we all know, transparency is critical in ensuring that the VA is serving our veterans as effectively as possible. Veterans, their caregivers, VSOs, and the public all deserve easy and timely

access to information about veteran care, VA performance, and other data when requested.

Unfortunately, VA currently has among the worst backlogs of Freedom of Information Act requests across Federal agencies. Among these backlogged requests are inquiries about VA performance and decisions, as well as requests from veterans for their own personal records.

My bill will ensure that the VA takes concrete steps to reduce its FOIA backlogs so that these veterans get answers. It also calls for the National Archives and Records Administration to review VA's FOIA process.

Finally, the bill requires the VA to analyze the root causes of its FOIA backlog and to identify technology needs and procedural improvements that will increase efficiency in responding to requests.

This straightforward bill is a commonsense step toward improving the flow of information from the VA to all the stakeholders it serves.

Madam Speaker, I urge all of my colleagues to support it today, and I look forward to working to get it signed into law.

Mr. BOST. Madam Speaker, I encourage my colleagues to support this bill, and I yield back the balance of my time.

Mr. TAKANO. Madam Speaker, I would like to close by saying I urge all of my colleagues to support the VA FOIA Reform Act of 2021. We need to make sure that our veterans and their families get information that they have requested from the VA in a timely manner.

Madam Speaker, I yield back the balance of my time.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The question is on the motion offered by the gentleman from California (Mr. TAKANO) that the House suspend the rules and pass the bill, H.R. 2726.

The question was taken; and (two-thirds being in the affirmative) the rules were suspended and the bill was passed.

A motion to reconsider was laid on the table.

□ 1445

CLARIFYING ROLE OF DOCTORS OF PODIATRIC MEDICINE IN DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Mr. TAKANO. Madam Speaker, I move to suspend the rules and pass the bill (H.R. 2545) to amend title 38, United States Code, to clarify the role of doctors of podiatric medicine in the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes.

The Clerk read the title of the bill.

The text of the bill is as follows:

H.R. 2545

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,